

THE BIG ISSUE

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A HAND UP, NOT A HANDOUT



inTOXicated

**London's most prolific vandal
— interviewed by Banksy**

TOX is the most prolific London vandal ever.
Banksy is the most well-known street artist ever.
This is the first interview TOX has ever given.
And one of the few times Banksy has interviewed anyone.

Banksy: Hello TOX. Are you allowed to carry pens on a bus yet? [It was rumoured in graffiti circles that TOX had done so much damage and been caught so many times that he was banned from carrying any mark-making tool on public transport, under penalty of an immediate 30-day jail term]

TOX: It wasn't 30 days, it was five years maximum cos it was breach of ASBO. I think that's what you're on about init? ASBO means Anti Social Behaviour Order where they could lock you up for stuff that wasn't actually a criminal offence, stuff like trespass and carrying a can of spray paint. I done nine prison sentences in all, six months here, six months there; I got sent to prison for not having a train ticket once, a couple times for just possessing a can of spray paint without even using it. I served four months for having a glass bottle in my hand cos they said I could use it to scratch windows.

From age 18 I was going in and out of Feltham with all the other unfortunate childhood souls of society, Feltham, if you don't know, is a prison for young people and it's the worst prison cos young people got something to prove, it's extra violent. I think it has failed every prison inspection

in the last 25 years. It's filthy, dirty and full of poor and lost boys. Now the irony is that my mate used to work there but six months ago got banned because he was too loud about how bad it was, they banned him from working there cos he stood up for the kids, he stood up for the truth. Life is full circles init.

Back then I had the whole British Transport Police against me. I was number one hated by a whole police force. I couldn't walk through South London without getting stopped, then I'd go to the Midlands and get recognised, they'd say 'you're TOX, you're the screensaver on our computer'. It was bad harassment. They'd come to my house every fortnight, I got raided all the time, they would always nick me on a Friday cos they knew that courts weren't open till Monday so I'd have to spend three days waiting, just to mess with my life. They even reserved cells for me in the police station on Christmas Day, cos that day is a special day for us graffiti artists: Father Xmas was going down the chimney but I was ready to go down a manhole to batter a tube, being artistic init.

A lot of my time inside was on remand. This won't make sense to people who don't know, but it's the worst. They force you to

plead guilty because the trial comes after the time that you generally would've served once you'd been given the judgment, so you plead guilty even if you're not, and then they use that guilty plea to screw your life later down the line. I remember the first time I pleaded guilty was because they had cancelled my court date twice. I wasn't guilty though, I was just trying to get out of prison but they're still using that guilty plea against me to this day. It's complicated but it's messed up. Anyway that's about 1% of the story, but basically it was way worse than 30 days, that's for sure.

B: I remember once standing on the platform at Earls Court tube looking down the track and seeing TOX03 painted on every steel upright, every junction box, every conceivable surface as far as the eye could see. It made me laugh out loud. I guess my question is – where does vandalism end and mental illness begin?

T: Where does mental illness start and end? Graffiti was escapism from worse things, if I didn't do graffiti I'd still be on the block in Brixton, I'd get dragged into way worse crimes like everyone else cos I was from one of the worst council estates in Britain, cos I went to the seventh worst school in the country, cos I left school when I was 13.

I escaped my hood, I escaped my postcode. How much graffiti I did might look mentally ill but it actually stopped me being a mental health problem for myself and other people.

Feltham gave me an assessment once, they said I was so determined to keep going to prison for something so – in their opinion – pointless and stupid. But in my mind it

gave me endless joy and happiness. In the end they assessed me as sane init. Thing was that the more they cracked down on me, the more they arrested me, the more determined I was to rebel against a system that didn't show me any opportunity. I saw it as a war between my world and theirs. I remember once they dropped a case due to lack of evidence so I went to the police station and collected 20 cans of paint that they had seized and I went direct to Upminster train yard with the paint still in a police evidence bag and did top-to-bottoms on the District Line with it. Rage against the machine, determination, freedom init. Like I said, where does mental illness start and end?

B: In several of my paintings I've put your tag in the background. I kind of use it to signify 'generic urban decay, damage and abandonment'. No offence. I guess I should've asked beforehand, but is that OK?

T: I don't mind. I always had people saying, "Banksy's using your name, when are you going to call him and cash in, he owes you money" and I was like "Nah I don't care, he stuck me up, I don't care, let him do it". I just cared about painting graffiti and stealing spray paint and being me init.

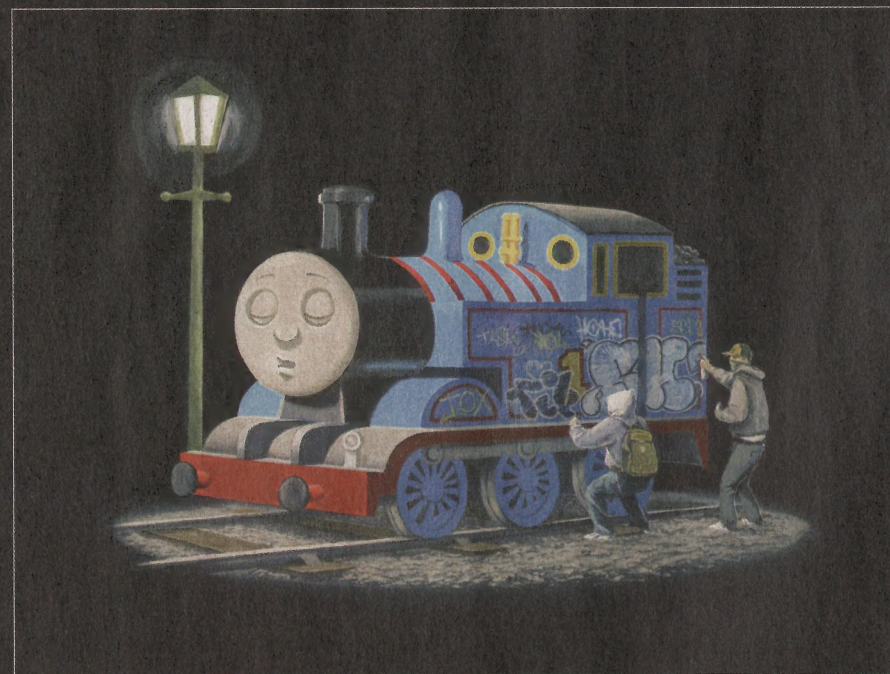
B: I'm assuming I was asked to do this interview because it might help with sales, rather than because you value my hot take on vandal culture. Traditionally there's always been mistrust and outright beef between 'proper' graffiti artists and street artists. Does that still hold or have things softened a little?

T: That's not why I asked, you took a lot of interest in me over the years and I never did an interview before and I thought you'd want to do it. I never asked for help,

I have respect for you init. If I was on the money thing I would've come knocking on your door when I was fresh out of prison, broke as it gets, just after you painted that big thing with the child blowing TOX bubbles in Camden. I never worked like that, init, I respect you. About all that street art wars though, I don't have an opinion. I didn't get involved, street art is a different world. It's like how I didn't get involved in the graffiti scene neither, I never go to legal walls, never ever.

I've got no followers on the internet, none of that. But yeh graffiti has softened, it's a whole different bunch of people doing it.

There's a lot of people doing it for the wrong reasons these days. I don't think a lot of those people would be involved if this was the 2000s init. In the ASBO generation us lot could go straight to prison for walking down the road with a spray can. Everyone active was against the system but nowadays people do it for a couple hundred quid and some likes from 10,000 fake friends on Instagram.



B: You're doing an art show. But it's the relentless city-wide damage and bare-faced audacity that are the cornerstones of your work. Is it a transferable thrill? Can your 'inside voice' ever do it justice? (It's the same problem for any artist who gets most of their traction from the street. To use a clumsy metaphor – if you go to the zoo and see a captive wild animal, maybe the best you can hope for is that a bunch of school kids will bang on the glass while you smear your poo on it?)

T: If I go too arty I'm being fake. I make my best art under pressure; 10Foot said I should stick the canvases in a tunnel during service and he would start a clock and after seven minutes he'll start throwing rocks at me like an old-school security guard. Me and him might invest in a taser, if we take longer than Plaistow Back Jump, seven minutes, then that's it, you're getting electrocuted. You can start to think you have to please people but really they're pleased with me being myself so I lose it when I start to please them. One of my limits is that I'm strictly using the 11 colours of London Underground lines. I've got to keep it real because obviously

me and London Underground have had a love-hate relationship that has gone on for 25 years. I love them, they hate me

"I guess I should've asked beforehand"

but I keep going back for more. Maybe one day they'll love me back, but maybe the moment they love me then I'm not being myself? That's how I'll work it out init.

B: A lot of graffiti writers who 'go straight' seem to aim for the most establishment part of the art establishment. They go from kings of the trackside to full-on abstract expressionists. WTF?

T: I don't even know what that means, you're talking about some arty talk now man. Anyway I didn't never go straight, I'm under investigation right now.

And we're not doing it establishment, we're doing it our own way. We don't beg the posh art world or the Shoreditch art world, we're doing it ourself the un-legit way, the writer way, the way people would expect us to do and it's all friends in our circle. And my stuff I'm painting is the same stuff I painted with stolen paint on London Underground trains, blob style, polka dot style init. I never cared about all that stylish New York graffiti, I didn't watch all these Subway Arts and mad graffiti movies, I didn't have internet in my house to watch all that anyway cos I was too poor, and I'm not joking. I don't care about anyone else's opinion init. I just carry on and carry on and carry on.

B: Last year there was a huge show about urban culture called 'Beyond the Streets'. Your contribution consisted of trespassing onto the railway, ripping out a ton of cables and security equipment and 'exhibiting' it in a crisp white room near Sloane Square. It was funny as hell but very, very illegal. Are you expecting this show to get raided by the police?

T: We didn't know what we were jumping into back then init. I'd never been to no art gallery. Me and 10Foot and Fume got asked to do it so we made some artwork in a dogshit alleyway in South London in the middle of January, round the corner from 10Foot's squat. We were chappin', all these people thought we were doing drugs or whatever and didn't want to walk down the alleyway but we were making paintings for some posh art gallery. But as far as this show, the police still hate us, they try to cause as many issues as possible, be a pain in the arse, try and make your family hate you and shit, they make it very personal, I don't understand why but they take it very personally. So they'll find an excuse if they want to come and raid us init. It's a very big chance I think... but that never stopped us.

B: I should give you the opportunity to big up your partners in crime. Can you explain what you love about Fume and 10Foot and their work?

T: When I first started in the year 2000 I'd see FUME up on every train, every yard I'd go into. He's crazy as fuck in a good way, as you can see from his paintings. He's one of a kind, he's like a kid but with the wisdom of an older and he never looked down on me back then when a lot of people did. And 10Foot... 10Foot smashed it properly on his own, came from nowhere and earned his stripes properly and did it for the right reasons. We done a lot of things together, way more than just graf. But he was always a pain in the arse cos he'd just get a way bigger tag than me.

B: In the interests of balance – Transport for London would say your work is dangerous, selfish and deteriorates the quality of service for everyone. Discuss.

T: Nah I disagree. It can be dangerous but I've run down a lot of tunnels and I've never been squashed by a train, not me, no, never. I know where the alcoves are, how far they are, I know the noises of the rails. A lot of graffiti writers have died on the tracks but anyway if I told TOX02 how dangerous the railway tracks are TOX02 would completely ignore me, he was on a mission, in his own world, and the more you tell someone like TOX02 to not do something, the more likely they are to be a pain in the arse. And selfish? Nah. I literally just changed the colour of the train's surface. If you want to take the train out of service then you're the one that causes delays, not me. I think TFL are the selfish ones cos they've taken my train out of service when those commuters could get on a train with my graffiti on it init.